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OBITUARY: Henry H. Hildebrand (1922-2003) As Remembered by Two Friends

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Dr. Henry H. Hildebrand died in Corpus Christi on 14 August 2003, five days short of his 81st birthday. A Memorial Service was held for him in the Natural Resources Center at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi on 12 September. About 100 friends, family, colleagues and former students gathered to celebrate Hildebrand and the impact he had on many lives.

From Pat Burchfield:

For fourteen years answer to a biological mystery lay waiting to be discovered. A film made by Ingeniero Andres Herrera of Tampico, Tamaulipas, Mexico on the morning of 10 June 1947 held the answer to the "riddle of the ridley". Although nests had been reported by John Werler in 1951, a major nesting ground had yet to be discovered. An avid nature enthusiast, Ingeniero Herrera had screened his film for friends, even a group in Chicago, but not for the scientific community.

An inveterate traveler and researcher, Dr. Henry Hildebrand of the University of Corpus Christi, Texas, knew practically every fisherman, fisheries officer and researcher working in the Gulf of Mexico. In 1960, on one of his many trips to Mexico he was made aware of a film depicting thousands of ridleys nesting at the same time. He sought out Ingeniero Herrera and the rest is history. The primary nesting ground of the Kemp's ridley or "tortuga lora" had been found on an isolated stretch of beach near the small ranching community called Rancho Nuevo. Following Dr. Archie Carr's lead, and inspired by the book *The Windward Road*, Hildebrand had been actively searching for the nesting ground of the Kemp's ridley. He interviewed fishermen stopping at every palm-thatched local restaurant with a turtle carapace hanging on the wall from Tamaulipas to southern Veracruz but, like Dr. Carr, he failed to find a nesting ridley. In 1961, once the nesting place of the ridley was known to science, Mexican researchers and biologists soon discovered that the turtle numbers had declined dramatically since the 1940's and they began a conservation effort in 1966. In 1978 a binational effort involving Mexico and the USA was begun when it seemed as if the "tortuga lora" was well on the way toward extinction.

At that time Dr. Hildebrand was in frequent contact with Dr. Rene Marquez Millán who headed up the Sea Turtle Program at Rancho Nuevo for Mexico and Dr. Peter Pritchard and his students who made up the USA assistance group in those difficult early years. Dr. Hildebrand's encyclopedic knowledge of the Gulf of Mexico was a critical element in the early recovery efforts for the ridley.

Over the ensuing years Dr. Hildebrand made countless trips to the Rancho Nuevo nesting beach and was great friends with one of the influential local ranchers, Don Antonio Gonzalez who became an active and important participant in the effort to preserve what little remained of the "tortuga lora". Dr. Hildebrand always remained keenly interested in the plight of the Kemp's ridley and at least once a month, starting in April through October of each year, he would call or stop by the Gladys Porter Zoo wanting the latest figures of nesting turtles, hatchlings and general progress on the recovery effort. His work also inspired a Brownsville business contractor, Daryl Adams, to begin a grass roots conservation effort to establish a second nesting beach on South Padre Island in 1963.

From Wes Tunnell:

Henry Hildebrand began his journey to Texas from the landlocked state of Kansas. He was born in Fowler in 1922 to a high school teacher and teacher-turned-housewife. From the time he entered high school, Hildebrand was interested in zoology and fisheries because of the influence of his uncle, Samuel Hildebrand, who is considered one of the greatest ichthyologists ever produced by this country. He received his bachelor's degree in zoology from the University of Kansas in 1946 and a master's degree in fisheries in 1948 from McGill University in Montreal. After he left McGill, Hildebrand began taking graduate courses at the University of Washington, which he left after a year and ended up at what is now the University of Texas Marine Science Institute in Port Aransas. He earned his PhD from the University of Texas in 1954 under the direction of Gordon Gunter. From there he was to work in Veracruz, Mexico, establishing a Pompano fishery. However, days before he arrived in Veracruz, red tide destroyed most of the marine life near the shore, making it nearly impossible to establish the fishery. Hildebrand subsequently returned to Corpus Christi and took a teaching job in 1957 at the University of Corpus Christi (UCC).

Hildebrand's research while in Texas included groundbreaking work on the Laguna Madre of Tamaulipas in Mexico, the fauna of the penaeid shrimp grounds in the western and southern Gulf of Mexico, red tides in Texas and Mexico, oil and tar on beaches, baseline and environmental monitoring in the Laguna Madre of Texas and Oso Bay in relation to a power plant start-up, and brine discharges by the petroleum industry in Texas streams. Most felt his greatest scientific achievement was finding the nesting grounds for the Kemp's ridley.

Hildebrand's research was not limited to Texas, however, or even the United States. He studied the king crab fishery in the Bering Sea, the cod fishery in Ungava Bay, Quebec, and he made countless trips to Mexico and Central America. Beginning in the late 1950's or early 1960's, Hildebrand took yearly trips to Mexico and British Honduras, now Belize, with a dozen or so students in tow. He studied the coral reefs, seagrass beds, oyster reefs, as well as many other habitats. Additionally, he taught his students about the culture and history of these areas and made a point to visit the ancient Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza, Uxmal, and Palenque.

Hildebrand moved to Texas A&I University (now Texas A&M) in Kingsville, where he taught and conducted research from 1973 to 1979 before entering the private sector as a consultant, primarily for commercial fishing interests. He retired in 1985.

He had many crowning achievements during his career, including the establishment of the marine science program at UCC, now Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMU-CC), in 1957. Hildebrand developed a hands-on, field-oriented marine biology program that continues to be the model for the marine science program today. Students are taken into the field and learn things from the field, not just in the lab or in books - one of Dr. Hildebrand's most valuable contributions say former students.

Although Dr. Hildebrand retired in 1985, he stayed active in marine science. He kept current with local issues, especially those of commercial fisherman, and proved to be an important proponent for the shrimping industry. Even in Dr. Hildebrand's last years, he visited the TAMU-CC campus almost weekly, eager to visit colleagues, former students, and old friends about marine science and current issues. An endowed scholarship has been set up in Dr. Hildebrand's name at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. For further, more detailed reading and information about Dr. Hildebrand, see two articles by Jim Hiney in Texas Sea Grant magazine, Texas Shores, Spring 2002, pp. 21-28 and Fall 2003, pp. 2-3)

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